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ABSTRACT

Over the last 25 years, less attention has been devoted to the role of the economist as teacher or professor than to the role of economist as scholar or researcher. Teachers have been seen as passive recipients of advances in economics research that they simply hand on to their students. Yet teachers perform an important gatekeeping function when they choose which material they will cover and emphasize in their classes and which material they will ignore. In this study 114 economics teachers at 26 colleges and universities in Illinois responded to a survey dealing with topics covered in their classes, sources for course materials, and criteria for choosing materials and topics. While teachers did include almost all of the advances in economics which Deutsch and others (1971) considered important in their evaluation of crucial ideas in social science, as well as some of the contributions from other fields, they also included topics not chosen by Deutsch. Rather than being passive recipients of the products of research, faculty are responsible for assimilating, organizing, and disseminating the contents of the field. By their choices, teachers help determine which ideas will perish and which will survive. (IS)

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Coverage of Major Topics in Economics in The Undergraduate Curriculum: Economists as Gatekeepers

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Abstract

One hundred ten economics teachers at 26 colleges and universities in Illinois demonstrate the important role of teachers in organizing and structuring the undergraduate curriculum. The role of teachers as gatekeepers who decide which issues, methods and theories will survive or perish is explored.

Coverage of Major Topics in Economics in The Undergraduate Curriculum: Economists as Gatekeepers

Contributions from the field of economics to major advances in the area of social science have been prominently noted. Deutsch and colleagues isolated 62 major advances in the area of social science since 1900. Twelve of these contributions were attributed to the field of economics (Deutsch, Platt, & Senghaas, 1971). On the average according to these authors a major advance was made in economics every seven years. Despite the thoroughness of the procedures used to document contributions from the social sciences, Deutsch and colleagues failed to demonstrate the widespread acceptance of these contributions. Although it is assumed by these authors that advances had received acceptance by the academic community, no evidence is presented to show that teachers outside the mainstream of researchers and scholars have included coverage of major advances in economics in the undergraduate curriculum.

The assumption that major advances in econmics and social science in general automatically penetrate higher education curricula, is part of a more invidious posture which portrays teachers in general as passive recipients of scholarly work. While a focus on the production of research and major advances is important, the less dramatic activities of professors at colleges and universities should not be ignored. Teachers at the undergraduate level form important gatekeeping functions for the discipline, which contribute to the evolution of the field and serve to maintain continuity for succeeding generations of scientists, students and citizens. More specifically teachers in higher education are responsible for gathering formation through various communication channels and for applying selection criteria to available sources.

How do economists perform these functions? The present study answers this question and helps to explain how the academic community contributes to the survival of theories, methods and issues economics.

One area which suggests a useful way of bridging the gap between the diffusion of research knowledge and spread of social science knowledge in higher education is the population approach or evolutionary theories such as those proposed by Campbell and Toulmin (Barringer, Blanksten & Mack, 1965; Toulmin, 1972). These theories when applied to teaching help us to understand that members of the academy serve to select the fads and fashions of science and more importantly serve as editors who develop successive generations of scientific interpretations.

An examination of the evolutionary or population approach suggests a way of viewing the activities of teachers of higher education (Cavalli-Svorza & Feldman, 1973). The transmission of knowledge from a population approach, is part of a broader process of evolution which characterizes change in social institutions, including education and the professions. The population approach seeks to establish a) what elements of a system are changing and b) what the mechanisms are by which elements of a system change or are replaced through time. Philosopher of science, Stephen Toulmin, suggests more specifically that we examine "the channels of intellectual innovation by which 'conceptual variants' enter the current scientific debate and the role of periodicals and textbooks in the formation and transmission of a conceptual tradition" (1972, p. 505-507). Toulmin states that is is fruitful to investigate "the selection criteria, procedures and/or prejudices to which those variants are exposed, in competing for an established place in a particular science" (1972, p. 505, 506). Campbell (1956) also specifies the necessity of observing how elements are

preserved, propagated or reproduced. In the present study, these elements of the evolutionary or population models proposed by Campbell (1965) and Toulmin (1972) are illustrated by examining teachers' information habits, particularly how teachers gather and select current concepts in economics.

Through the process of selection, college teachers are continually reconstructing the population or pool of ideas which comprise the domain of economics. An investigation such as that suggested by the works of Campbell and Toulmin can reveal how ideas are selected in such a way that some perish and others survive.

The present study explores the extent of coverage of major contributions of economics and related fields to the undergraduate economics curriculum and examines what sources are most valuable for locating current course material as well as how material is selected.

Methods

A sample of 26 schools, including ten universities, eight four-year colleges, and eight community colleges were selected at random from a list of higher education institutions in Illinois. A sample of 26 schools, including ten universities, eight four-year colleges, and eight community colleges were selected at random from a list of higher education institutions in Illinois. Economics teachers were located by contacting each school and requesting names of those who were teaching economics. Two hundred one teachers were located and sent a survey. Responses were received from 114 teachers for a response rate of 56%. Each survey included a list of 62 major social science advances proposed by Deutsch and colleagues. Teachers were asked to indicate the importance of each topic to undergraduate courses they were currently teaching by

rating the extent of coverage from "1" ('is the major focus of the course') to "10" ('receives no coverage'). Responding professors were asked to add topics to the list that were equal or of greater significance than those already on the list.

In addition academics were asked to rate the importance of communication channels in their search for undergraduate course materials. Channels included 'professional sources' like books and journals, nonprofessional sources like magazines, newspapers and annual corporate reports as well as sources derived during professional training in graduate school.

In addition teachers were asked to rate the importance of criteria used to select specific course content from information sources that were available. Items specifically took into account student related concerns (whether information is at an appropriate level of difficulty), teacher oriented criteria (whether information was of particular interest to the teacher) and discipline considerations (whether information present current professional topics in the field).

Scores for communication channels and course information selection criteria were rated in terms of importance and frequency of useage. Scores based on perceived importance ranged from one to ten and measures of frequency of useage ranged from one to five. Results are presented as a weighted score where channel and criteria significance is multiplied by useage and divided by two.

Results from the survey identified what major advances receive coverage in the undergraduate curriculum, where useful information may be found, and by what criteria information is actually selected for inclusion in undergraduate economics courses.

Results

Table I presents the degree of coverage received by major contributions from the field of economics to the undergraduate curriculum. Included as well are those major advances from mathematics, philosophy and political science that were among the twenty major advances receiving the highest coverage in the economics curriculum. Eleven of the twelve major advances attributed to economics appear among the top twenty.[1] The list also includes four topics from the field of mathematics, three from philosophy, and two from political science.

Since the advances used by economists all originated between 1900 and 1956, it might be speculated that those that are covered less were more likely to have originated later in the century. However an examination of dates of origin for the twenty topics showed no relation; the average date of origin for the first ten topics was 1927 and for the last ten topics the date was 1928. Similarly, an examination of the dates of just these advances from the field of economics revealed that the average date of origin for the first five economic topics was 1929 while the average date for the last six economic topics was 1924.

Among sources used by teachers of economics to locate course material professional sources predominate. Especially important relative to 'colleagues' or prepared 'bibliographies' are 'books and journals.' Sources received during professional training still show modest influence as a source of material while sources outside the professional gatekeeping boundaries are least significant.

[1]The remaining advance from economics, 'computer simulation of economic systems' received moderate coverage with a rating of 5.86.

For respondents who teach freshman/sophmore courses, the professional sources of information are less important than respondents teaching primarily upper division courses. For those teaching upper division courses, sources of information from graduate or undergraduate school and non-professional sources are less important than those teaching lower division courses. One respondent stated "I even use articles from the business section of the newspaper, if that can help to relate economic principles to the daily lives of students at the intro (ductory) level."

Among selection criteria judged to be the most significant are student oriented criteria, with 'level of difficulty' and 'interest' (value) to students' predominating. Discipline related factors also demonstrate a significant influence, especially the ability of material to complement other course material or place topics in a contemporary or historical perspective.

Discussion

That major advances in the field of economics form an important part of the undergraduate curriculum and thus have received widespread acceptance in academia is borne out by the results in Table I. The top eleven topics to receive exclusive or much coverage are judged very important to fairly important in the undergraduate curriculum while the last nine topics are judged to have received moderate coverage. A glance at the list shows that the undergraduate curriculum has been able to make significant use of material from other disciplines in the undergraduate curriculum. While the list of major social sciences proposed by Deutsch includes topics from anthropology, psychology, and sociology, not surprisingly economics teachers have found advances from mathematics, philosophy and political science more useful. Some

ideas which originated in fields outside economics have been fruitfully adopted to economic concerns (e.g., computers or large scale sampling in social research). Those topics which appear near the top of the list, and thus receive greater coverage are more likely to receive coverage in an introductory economics course than topics lower on the list which appear more specialized and which have greater likelihood of being taught in an upper division of junior/senior level course.

It has been assumed by some that teachers in higher education play no or little role in the evolution of scientific traditions. The role of academicians can be seen to be taken for granted as in the work of Deutsch, et al. (1971) who claimed widespread acceptance by higher education yet failed to demonstrate the acceptance of major social science advances among academicians apart from those who had produced research. Deutsch's list of major advances was based, as the authors readily admit, on personal judgment with advice from a number of colleagues. The present study shows that teachers, with varying levels of approval transmitted the advances noted by Deutsch. In addition they gave widespread acceptance to topics not chosen by Deutsch. Specifically the following topics were listed independently by at least three or more respondents: macroeconomics (including comparative and model building techniques), international trade, and money and monetary policy and theory. Subsequent research should establish the importance of these topics in the economics curriculum.

That the topics received different amounts of coverage indicates the kind of role which teachers play in determining emphasis in the field. Rather than being passive recipients of the products of research, the professoriate are responsible for assimilating, organizing, and disseminating the contents of the field based on judgments of the relative merits of topics to the curriculum.

Part of academics' responsibilities are to search out and locate material relevant to their courses. The important gatekeeping function is underlined by teachers dependence on sources within the profession; thus teachers help to preserve the continuity and boundaries of economics.

As academics are well aware, the location and availability of information is the beginning of a time consuming process by which sources are evaluated in terms of their suitability for a syllabus or course. The information value of each source must be weighed against other criteria like difficulty and even cost. The weight of factors at the undergraduate level might be expected to differ from the balance of factors used to select material for graduate courses. At this point academics once again serve a gatekeeping function, insuring that some issues, methods, or theories are preserved while others are dropped.

Summary

While emphasis over the last twenty-five years has played up the role of economist-scholar and researcher, less attention has been devoted to the role of economist as teacher or professor. A misleading picture of higher education as monolithic and passive has limited our investigation and understanding of the professoriate as active participants in the evolution of economics. Teachers are an important component in the organization and structuring of economics, making many choices as gatekeepers and determining which ideas will perish and which will survive.

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Table I

Economists Coverage of Major Social Science Advances

Receives All or Much Coverage in Courses and Date of Origin

Rank	Score	Topic
1	2.60	Economic Propensities, Employment, and Fiscal Policy (ec.) 1928-1944
2	2.98	Economics of Monopolistic Competition (ec.) 1930-1933
3	3.38	National Income Accounting (ec.) 1933-1940
4	3.77	Social Welfare Function in Politics and Economics (ec.) 1920-1956
5	4.29	Econometrics (ec.) 1935-1940
6	4.60	Theories of Economic Development (ec.) 1943-1958
7	4.64	Role of Innovations in Socioeconomic Change (ec.) 1908-1914
8	4.66	Central Economic Planning (ec.) 1920-1926
9	4.69	Cost Benefit Analysis (Planned Program Budgeting) (pol.) 1956-1963
10	4.71	Theory and Measurement of Social Inequalities (ec.) 1900-1908
11	4.81	Statistical Decision Theory (math) 1939-1950
12	5.48	Game Theory (math) 1928-1944
13	5.49	Input-Output Analysis (ec.) 1936-1953
14	5.52	General Systems Analysis (phil) 1936
15	5.64	Computers (math) 1943-1958
16	5.65	Gradual Social Transformation (pol.) 1900-1938
17	5.68	Unity of Logic and Mathematics (phil) 1905-1914
18	5.72	Operational Definitions (phil) 1927-1938
19	5.76	Large Scale Sampling in Social Research (math) 1930-1953
20	5.83	Linear Programming (ec.) 1938-1950

Table II

Sources of Course Material and Selection Factors

Used by Teachers of Economics*

Professional Sources	Weighted Rating		
	Total (N=114)	Fresh/ Soph. (N=30)	Upper Division (N=84)
Books, Journals	2.14	2.88	1.88
Colleagues	4.38	4.45	4.36
Bibliographies	5.05	5.68	4.81
	$\bar{X}$ = 3.86	$\bar{X}$ = 4.33	$\bar{X}$ = 3.68
Sources from Training			
Graduate, Undergraduate School	5.04	3.85	5.46
	$\bar{X}$ = 5.04	$\bar{X}$ = 3.85	$\bar{X}$ = 5.46
Non Professional Sources			
Magazines, Newspapers, Reports	6.30	3.08	7.47
Students	9.17	7.25	9.85
	$\bar{X}$ = 7.74	$\bar{X}$ = 5.15	$\bar{X}$ = 8.66

Student Oriented Selection Factors	Total (N=114)
Cost to Students	7.67
Interest to Students	3.55
Level of Difficulty	1.89
	$\bar{X}$ = 4.37
Teacher Oriented Selection Factors	
Interest Value of Material to Teacher	8.41
Material is in Area of Teacher's Competence	6.55
	$\bar{X}$ = 7.48
Discipline Oriented Selection Factors	
Material Presents Classic In Field	9.95
Material Complements Other Material in the Course	5.06
Information Deals with Current Professional Topic	7.35
Material Places Topic in Contemporary or Historic Perspective	5.93
	$\bar{X}$ = 7.07

* Scores represent respondents assessments of significance multiplied by frequency of usage - 2. The higher the score the lower the overall importance of communication channels and selection factors. The maximum score obtainable is 25.